SOUTH MIAMI

By Susan Perry Redding

What is now the City of South Miami, located southwest of the greater Miami area, was at the turn of the twentieth century part of Dade County's last frontier. At the time pioneer settlers began to arrive in the region, "civilization" extended from Coconut Grove along the bayshore to Cutler. A wagon road that was later to become part of the Ingraham Highway extended as far south as Cocoplum Plaza. From there to Cutler was only a path.

Early settlers during the period from 1884-1896 included James Nugent, Adam Richards, the Trapp family, John Hinton, the Kingsley family, the Hardees, John Rogers, Captain Simmons (whose wife was a medical doctor), A.F. Long, the Ramseys, Captain J. J. Hayden (for whom the Hayden mango is named), and John Burtashaw. It was through John Burtashaw, Wilson Larkin's father-in-law, that Larkins and his family came to the South Miami area.

Wilson A. Larkins was born in 1860 in Tennessee. Wilson arrived in Rutland, Florida in his mid-twenties looking for work. Among the people he met there were the Burtashaw family and brothers, Archie and Marshall Ramsey. Wilson courted Katie "Essie" Burtashaw and married her in 1888, while Essie's sister, Mary Comfort, married Archie Ramsey. The families farmed and entered other business ventures together as the years passed.

In February of 1896, Central Florida's citrus crop was completely wiped out by a late freeze. Wilson took his young family back to Tennessee, while the Burtashaws went south to the Miami area. John Burtashaw found work setting out a grove for Joe Jennings, so he bought a house on the west side of the trail to Cutler, just south of today's Sunset Drive. In January of 1897, Wilson, Essie, five children, sixteen cows, three horses and all their household goods arrived in Miami by passenger and freight cars. Wilson later built a house on the east side of the Cutler Trail at 80th Street (Davis Drive). A barn for the horses and mules was built just to the west. A year later, Wilson built a store/trading post near the circle at Sunset Drive. Roads in Dade County were merely dirt trails through the trees and brush.

Since settlers had to go to Cocoanut Grove for their mail and supplies, Wilson petitioned the government for a post office at the trading post he had established, and when it was granted, the settlement was given the name "Larkins." Wilson preferred "Manila," "Cocoaplum" or

"Elizabeth," but accepted the government's choice. On July 6, 1899, Wilson Larkins was confirmed Postmaster, and Mattie Lou Burtashaw became the first postal clerk.

Wilson, a tall man, had a special bicycle which was fitted with tanks to deliver milk and solid rubber tires to avoid blowouts. His major customer was the Royal Palm Hotel, and deliveries were made twice a day – morning and evening. The children fed the chickens and hogs even when they were still in diapers. All family members had chores, as their home was a farm, grove, dairy, moving company and trading post all in one. Life was hard but rewarding. There were no paved roads, no electricity – only the abundance of land and warmth.

An earlier settler, Adam C. Richards, bought 186 acres from the U.S. Government for seventy-five cents an acre in the late 1880s. As there was no school in the area, Richards deeded one acre to Dade County for a school in 1896. This was at the southwest corner of Sunset and Erwin Roads. Later the school was moved to its present site at Sunset and SW 52 Avenue.

The second acre south on Erwin was deeded to Pinewood (or Cocoaplum) Cemetery Trustees. Wilson Larkins, Arthur Lang and Arthur Kingsley were the original trustees. It has been said that the land was unsuitable for farming, and was therefore used as a cemetery. Indeed, most graves were dug with dynamite, which shook the neighbors' homes. Some years later, three more acres were added to the private cemetery. As years passed, the cemetery fell to vandalism and overgrowth. The last known burial was in 1944. However, since 1983 a strong effort has been made to restore Pinewood, and it is now a designated historic site. Exotic growth has been removed, native trees and shrubs have been planted, and the replacement of markers and headstones continues. Through exhaustive research, most of which was done by Harriet Stiger Liles, 180 early pioneers have been found to be buried there.

When Henry Flagler extended the Florida East Coast Railway south from Miami to Homestead, it marked the beginning of the present South Miami. Weekly freight service began in 1904, and two years later, Wilson Larkins bought property at the intersection of US 1 and Sunset Drive to take advantage of the rail transportation. He established a grocery and general supply store located on the site of what is today the historic Dorn-Martin Building. The railroad created an economic boon for all sorts of trade in produce and supplies for the growing community.

Eventually, the center of the settlement moved west, and Larkins sold his house and farm to George Merrick as part of the new city of Coral Gables. Merrick gave permission to

workmen to dismantle the house and reuse the lumber. That job became impossible because of the strength of the pine and solid construction. The house would not come apart, so it was bulldozed.

The town of Larkins grew and thrived near the railroad station. Fruit and vegetable packing houses were full and busy. John Opsahl built a store and the Southern Pines Hotel. The Dorn brothers from Chicago built a drug store, bank and the new post office. The bank never opened because of the many bank failures at the time. Harold Dorn married Mable White in 1912, and Robert Dorn married Mary Wheeler in 1914. The Dorns invested heavily in the area and urged many others to come to Larkins. The Dorns also grew avocados and mangos, sold grower's supplies, and also sold insurance of all kinds.

Robert Dorn's most elaborate venture was a large luxury theater building that faced Dixie Highway between Sunset and Red Road. The façade of the building had wide terraced steps and three arched entrances. The small archways on either side opened into stores, one occupied by Harold Dorn for his fruit crating and shipping business. The central arch opened into the theater, which had a gently sloping floor down to a cross aisle that led to side exits. The auditorium had padded seats for about 200 people. The exposed ceiling beams were painted in a vine motif. Unique floor tiles depicted various scenes in the story of Don Quixote and his squire, Sancho Panza. The pair appeared in nine oblong tiles and six square ones surrounded by a border of Moorish tiles in conventional design.

At the left of the auditorium, in front of the stage, was an imposing electric organ – the largest south of Atlanta – even larger than the Olympia's in downtown Miami. Mr. Dorn had advertised for an organist in the northern papers, and the man he selected arrived two days before the opening of the theater. When he sat down to play, people from all over the town crowded the theater to listen. The theater opened on time, September 4, 1926, with the premiere of Universal Studio's picture, "Her Big Night", starring Laura LaPlante. The theater operated for about a year, until the boom went bust and the theater closed because no one could afford a twenty-five-cent movie.

For every pioneer who came to South Florida and stayed, there were at least three who gave it a try and left. Francis Infinger came at the end of the Civil War. He was elected sheriff and tax collector of Dade County. John Perry Dowling worked for the Florida East Coast Railway and built the first house in what is now South Miami. Robert Shelley married Sue

Ramsey and erected a building on Sunset Drive with an arched arcade. J.W. Barrs, a Dowling son-in-law, built the first store on the west side of the railroad tracks – The White Palace Grocery.

In 1909, the Erwin family came from Indiana and bought the western half of Adam Richards' homestead, from Sunset to Davis Road. Mac Foster came in 1910, looking for a place for his wife's parents, the Jordans, and purchased ten acres from Richards east of the Erwins. Robert Erwin built their home, which was purchased a few years later by the Dorns. John Opsahl took over the post office from Wilson Larkins, and bought the stock from his store. He then built his own store across the street – the first concrete block building in the area. William Laesch and his wife Katherine came from Michigan in 1899. They were soon growing guavas but were not able to sell or ship their fruit because it spoiled so fast. They later became wealthy and famous around the world for guava jelly.

South Miami has experienced stormy politics from its beginning. On March 6, 1926, an incorporation committee headed by J. Lamar Paxson succeeded in getting 69 of the 85 qualified electors in the proposed corporate limits to attend a meeting at the Methodist Episcopal Church. The first act of the assembly was to change the name from Larkins to South Miami. Judge W.A. Foster was elected Mayor, and J.L. Paxson, John W. Barrs, J.B. Janes and Harold Dorn were elected aldermen. George Airey was appointed town clerk. The boundaries at incorporation were six square miles from Bird Road south on Red Road to 104 Street and North Kendall Drive, and west to Palmetto Road. Ten days after the 1926 hurricane, the train station burned to the ground and was not rebuilt except for a loading platform.

A new charter was granted on June 24, 1927, changing from the Town of South Miami to the City of South Miami. Unfortunately, the stock market crash of 1929 turned many fortunes to dust. City coffers became dangerously low, and citizens were allowed to secede one property at a time. In 1931, the residents voted to abolish the City of South Miami. However, in 1932, several citizens got a court order to force the City back into existence, claiming there was no provision to take care of the existing debts incurred by such things as the new American LaFrance fire engine and the outstanding bills for street lights. It was later learned that J.L. Yarborough, who would become mayor in 1935, had hidden the fire engine in his garage to keep it from being repossessed.

In 1933, with a population of 1500 residents and 32 businesses, the City of South MIami's area was trimmed to approximately four square miles. Other actions since then have changed the size of South Miami further. From Miller Road north to Bird Road, the city border resembles a checkerboard with few other than residents knowing whether their property is in or out of municipal jurisdiction.

The population of South Miami in 1933 had grown to approximately 1500, and the community was in need of a public park or recreation center. On January 1, 1935, the City Council passed ordinances dedicating land and appropriating $2350 for the purchase of materials and equipment for a community center. To cover labor costs, the city applied for funds from the Federal Emergency Relief Agency (FERA), one of President Franklin Roosevelt's "alphabet soup agencies," instituted to get the economy moving. About 16,000 Miamians received assistance from the agency, which was later known as the Works Progress Administration (WPA). (As a result of the WPA, many new buildings were constructed, including the Miami Beach Post Office, Miami Shores Golf Club, Coral Gables Fire and Police Station, Shenandoah Junior High School, Coral Way Elementary School, and an additional building at Jackson Memorial Hospital.)

City Council minutes indicate that the Rhinhart-Vernet Company supplied the lumber and other building materials, while the American Terrazzo Tile and Marble Company installed the terrazzo flooring. The community center was located on shady grounds, where supervised play was arranged for children. It was equipped with an auditorium, stage, dressing rooms, a complete kitchen and sanitation facilities. The rental fee for an evening was $2.

The building soon became the hub of social and civic activity. It has served as a meeting place for Boy and Girl Scouts, the Chamber of Commerce, the Woman's Club, and a U.S.O. center for dances during World War II. It became the public library in 1958, and in 1977 reverted to its original use. In May of 1979, the City Commission unanimously voted to rename the center for long time resident and former city clerk, Sylva G. Martin.

Sylva Graenicher Martin came to South Miami following her parents' move in 1917. Her father, Dr. Graenicher, had a Ph.D. in biology, and received his M.D. in obstetrics and pediatrics. For their retirement, her parents bought ten acres on Sunset Drive. Sylva was 22 years old when she first arrived, and she soon married Ray Martin, the local pharmacist at Dorn-Martin Drugs. The marriage did not last long, and Ray then married Helen Stang, sister of the prominent banker

Omar Stang. Sylva was appointed city clerk in 1936, and retired in 1957. She was also the tax assessor and collector. She knew everyone in town and all that was going on. The city was her family. Sylva stayed quite active in city life after her retirement and wrote a history of the city in 1947 for the Police and Fire Association's Benefit Minstrel Show.

A small area west of the railroad was designated a "Negro Settlement" by the City Council in 1926. Most black people living in the area worked for the railroad. The first black to buy land in Larkins was Marshall Williamson, a Georgia State College graduate and a carpenter. He came to the area in 1912 and later donated land for St. John's A.M.E. church and for the J.R.E. Lee School. Williamson was known as the "Little Mayor" of South Miami, and worked constantly for the betterment of his people. In 1975, a small park near the school was created in his honor.

Sally Brown had the first grocery store in the section, and Sally's cousin had the first baby born in Larkins – James Richardson, who later became a Pullman porter on the Florida East Coast Railway. C.D. Lawrence, a minister, and his wife Regina, a nurse-midwife, were also early arrivals. Regina worked with the white doctors of Larkins and delivered most of the babies in the neighborhood. Others came, stayed, and still have family in South Miami, notably, Lewis and Marie Richardson in 1913, Oubell Holmes in 1922, Paul Lumpkins in 1921, John and Sarah Mozell in 1922, Abraham and Annie Mae Lamb in 1923 and John Kelly in 1923.

The history of South Miami could never be complete without mention of the Fuchs Baking Company and its most famous product, Holsum Bread. Karl Theodor Fuchs was born in Germany, and moved to New York as a teenager. There he met and married Anna Theresa Linke. About 1895, the family moved to Milan, Tennessee, an area known as Germantown. In 1903, Papa Fuchs was able to buy his own bakery, and later added a delicatessen. By 1910, the German residents of Milan were leaving, and while Fuchs' health was not good, he was tempted to also leave. About this time, his wife's brother, Fred, contacted them after many years of absence and said he was going to Florida and wanted the Fuchs to come along.

The two men got off the train at Naranja in 1912. Fuchs fell in love with the area, and bought a house near Homestead on Avocado Drive. Fuchs' entire family moved south with him in April of 1912. He tried farming for a while, but in 1913, opened Linke and Fuchs Homestead Bakery and Meat Market. Fuchs' son Charlie came to South Miami in 1934 and negotiated the purchase of the Riviera Theater building, which had long been vacant. It became the new home

of Fuchs Baking Company, making Holsum Bread. For many years, Fuchs Bakery sold hot bread right out of the oven. When the bread was baking, the aroma stopped traffic on Dixie Highway. Every Christmas, from 1940 until the 1970s, the old theater entrance was decorated with an elaborate Yule scene with costumed, animated figures in snow scenes. Holsum moved to new quarters in Medley in 1983, and the beautiful theater lost its life forever to a mall that failed and was also demolished after only ten years. This is now the site of the popular Shops of Sunset Place.

At the end of the twentieth century, only two South Miami locations, the Sylva Martin Building and the Orr House, are designated as "historic." Others have been lost, and with constant changes in county politics and demographics, many more may be lost.

The first historic designation was the George Orr House. The five acres on Sunset Drive and SW 64th Court were originally owned by W.V. Webb, who had purchased them from George Merrick's land company in 1917. The property was sold several times in the early twenties, until George E. Orr purchased it in 1926. The Orrs were a well-known family whose members played prominent roles in Miami's political and social affairs. Originally from Glasgow, Scotland, the family settled in Miami circa 1911. The three Orr brothers, George, Alexander and John, were all involved in the construction business in one aspect or another during South Florida's real estate boom in the mid 1920s. John B. Orr, probably the best known of the three, was a talented stonemason. His company specialized in cutting and sculpture work of the beautiful Florida keystone. John worked on the Biltmore Hotel, Vizcaya, Douglas Entrance, the Scottish Rite Temple and several hotels on Miami Beach. He may be best remembered for his crime-fighting spree as chairman of the "Committee of 100," an organization that attempted to remove from the area such elements as the Al Capone mob. Orr was the Dade County Grand Jury Foreman when mobster Al Capone lived near him on Palm Island. One night, during an ambush, Orr was severely beaten, dying months later, at age 46.

John's oldest son, Jack, served as a representative in the Florida Legislature during the late 1950s and was elected Mayor of Dade County in 1972. His youngest son, George, was an assistant state attorney and later became circuit court judge.

Another Orr brother, Alexander, was a plumbing and heating contractor. He served on the Miami City Commission, and, in 1940, he was elected Mayor of Miami. He was reportedly the richest of the Orrs, and socially prominent all his life. George E. Orr, the youngest of the

brothers, was also a building contractor, as well as superintendent of John's masonry company. He was the least known of the three, but nonetheless had a beautiful home built for him and his wife, Elizabeth, in 1935. It is a fine example of a home constructed using random-cut keystone, with many unique details. The property surrounding the home was later developed into a gated residential community. The Orr house has been beautifully renovated and is today a showplace.

This area grew and prospered because the Larkins/South Miami pioneers were a hardy lot. They all had much to do each day, with few conveniences. Still, they found time on Sunday to go to church, eat hearty meals together, and visit. The women even found time to socialize at the "Thimble Club" after washing loads of clothes in a tub using a pitcher pump. Mosquitoes, snakes and wild animals greeted each of them, and still they stayed.

Today, the City of South Miami, known as the city of "pleasant living," is a fully modern municipality, respecting its past while dealing with today's multi-faceted growth issues.

The city's founders, Wilson Alexander Larkins and his wife, Katie Estelle Burtashaw, had fifteen children – eleven of whom lived to adulthood. At a family reunion in South Dade in 1997, there were seventy-five descendants of the Larkins attending – still reveling in their heritage.

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Compiled by Susan Perry Redding with the generous assistance of Patricia Larkins, granddaughter of South Miami's founder; Joan Yarborough, daughter of the fifth mayor; and Doris S. Silver, chronicler of the Fuchs' family history.

Susan Redding is a native Miamian, granddaughter of Mabel Davis and Cleveland H. Jones, Sr., founder of Jones Boat Yard on the Miami River; and Mary Emaline McWilliams and George Lafayette Perry, pioneer builders and yachtsmen of Coconut Grove. She has lived in South Miami since 1972 and helped create the Historic Preservation Board for the city.

PHOTO CAPTIONS FOR SOUTH MIAMI

1. **The rocky terrain of the early South Miami area made it a challenge to travel by horse and wagon**. (*Courtesy of Susan Redding?*)

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1. **The rocky terrain of the early South Miami area made it a challenge to travel by horse and wagon**. (*Courtesy of the Historical Museum of Southern Florida)*

2. **The South Miami area was for many years referred to as Larkins, for the general store established in 1906 by Wilson Larkins at U.S. 1 and Sunset Drive near Flagler's railroad. Shown here, a Larkins basketball team ready to play**. *(Courtesy of the Historical Museum of Southern Florida)*

3. **A student works at a blackboard in the one-room Larkins schoolhouse. (***Courtesy of the Historical Museum of Southern Florida)*

4. **A beach party taking to the waters in style. (***Courtesy of the Historical Museum of Southern Florida)*

5. **The beautiful Riviera Theater, opened in 1926 by pioneer Richard Dorn, featured the largest organ south of Atlanta. It closed after only a year when the Florida real estate boom collapsed. In 1934, the Fuchs family bought the building as the home for their Fuchs Baking Company, making Holsum Bread there until the company moved to Medley in 1983. The building was demolished and is now the site of the Shops at Sunset Place. (***Courtesy of the Historical Museum of Southern Florida***)**

6. **The Holsum Bakery was elaborately decorated every Christmas from 1940 through the 1970s, as seen in this 1949 postcard**. (*Courtesy of Sam LaRoue*)

7. **The 1932 "Doc Thomas House" at 5530 Sunset Drive is now the headquarters for the Tropical Audubon Society.** (*Photo by Antoinette Naturale*)

8. **The Sylva Martin Center, located at 6130 Sunset Drive, was constructed of local oolitic limestone in 1935 and has been a hub of social and civic activity ever since.** *(Photo by Antoinette Naturale)*

9. **The George E. Orr House was built of random cut keystone in 1935. The home has been renovated in the last few years and is the focal point for the "Orr's Pond" gated residential development on Sunset Drive. (***Photo by Deborah Tackett***)**

10. **Dante Fascell Park on Red Road near North Kendall Drive is a popular South Miami recreational area. (***Photo by Deborah Tackett***)**

11. **The Shops at Sunset Place, covering the block from South Dixie Highway to Sunset along Red Road, have brought chain stores and nightlife to South Miami for the 21st century**. (*Photo by Deborah Tackett*)